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Rates of Recidivism: A Five Year Follow-Up

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Abstract

The study represents a five year community follow-up to determine the recidivism rate of individuals paroled or discharged from the Massachusetts Correctional Institutions during the year 1973. A goal of the study is to determine the validity of the department's traditional use of one year follow-up studies for determining recidivism rates. Some researchers have charged that one year follow-up studies may lead to premature conclusions in that results found in the first year of follow-up may reverse themselves during the second or third year. This issue is of particular concern to the department because the results of our one year follow-up studies have been used to justify the retention and expansion of a reintegration model believed to be linked to a downward trend in recidivism.

Our analysis revealed that 44% of the population was returned to prison within five years of release. This recidivism rate of 44% is a little more than double the rate originally determined in the one year follow-up study. Variation in recidivism rates occurred among individual releasing institutions ranging from a high of 55% for MCI-Concord and a low of 28% for MCI-Framingham.

A major finding of the study is that the basic results of our one year follow-up analyses remain valid with extended follow-up periods.

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The Division of Research of the Massachusetts Department of Correction routinely collects and publishes annual recidivism data for the yearly releases of prisoners from the state correctional institutions. Such data has been available on an annual basis since the year 1971. For the purposes of these reports, a recidivist is defined as any subject who within one year of release, has been returned to a state or federal correctional institution, or to a county house of correction or jail for a period of 30 days or more. The return to prison can occur as a violation of the conditions of parole or as a court commitment to prison for a new offense.

Though subject to obvious limitations, the one year follow-up period used in our definition of recidivism has allowed us to obtain feedback for planners and administrators in a reasonable time frame for the decision making process. For example, our annual recidivism reports have demonstrated a downward trend in recidivism rates for the years 1971 through 1978 and linked this downward trend to the introduction and expansion of a reintegration model through which inmates are gradually reintroduced to society.

This is accomplished through movement among institutions in descending security level and size, and through the use of home furloughs, work release, education release, and pre-release and halfway house programs. Many of the individual program components in the reintegration model were federally funded for experimental trial purposes and planned for pick up by permanent state funding at a later date if and when programmatic effectiveness could be demonstrated. The series of one year follow-up studies allowed timely input and thus research data was available in the decision making processes that led to an expansion of the reintegration programs and to the permanent state funding of these programs.

Some researchers feel, however, that the problems inherent to the one year follow-up studies lead to premature conclusions. For example, some researchers have pointed to the dangers of "cross-over effects" whereby the results found in the first year of follow-up reverse themselves during the second or third year. In fact, among others, the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals has officially recommended a three year follow-up period.

Concern that theoretical limitations of shortened follow-up periods could cast doubt on the validity of overall research findings led to a series of experimental studies. A first attempt involved a recidivism study with a two year follow-up period. In this study we found no evidence of "cross-over effects". Our

major findings from a one year follow-up analysis remained consistent with the two year follow-up analysis.

In order to further address the issues involved in the selection of one time period follow-up over another, the Division of Research undertook a five year follow-up recidivism study. The statistics from this study are now available and the purpose of this report is to provide a preliminary overview of findings.

Procedure

The study represents a five year community follow-up of all individuals discharged or paroled from Massachusetts Correctional Institutions during the year 1973. The same population has been used for a one and a two year follow-up recidivism analysis in a previously published study. Though the original study contained 966 individuals, the present effort determined that six of those individuals were released to custody (another criminal justice jurisdiction) and thus mistakenly included in the sample. Therefore, those six individuals were deleted and the present study consists of a population of 960 individuals, all released directly to the community.

The chief criterion used for determining recidivism was

whether or not the releasee was returned to a prison, either for a technical violation of parole or for a commitment for a new offense. Jail or house of correction sentences of less than one month were not counted. The second criterion was the length of time out before return. Each individual in the sample was followed for five years from the date of release. We were thus able to vary the second criterion for periods up to a five year follow-up. During the 5 year period of follow-up, nine individuals died, and were thus dropped from the sample. Therefore, the final sample size in the 5 year analysis was 951 individuals.

The analyses in this report are based on five categories of variables: (1) commitment variables, (2) personal background variables, (3) criminal history variables, (4) furlough variables and (5) recidivism variables.

Data was derived primarily from the computerized data base developed by the Correction and Parole Management Information System. Additional data was collected from the files of the Department of Correction, the Parole Board, and the Board of Probation. The data was analyzed on the Massachusetts State College Computer Network.

Findings

Our analysis revealed that 44% of the population was returned to prison within five years of release. This recidivism rate of 44% is a little more than double the rate originally determined in the one year follow-up study.

Variation in recidivism rates occurred among the specific releasing institutions. For example, releases from MCI-Concord exhibited the highest rate (55%) and releases from MCI-Framingham exhibited the lowest rate (28%). In general lower security institutions exhibited lower rates of recidivism; higher security institutions exhibited higher rates of recidivism. A summary of individual recidivism rates for the specific releasing institutions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Recidivism Rate By Releasing Institution:
Five Year Follow-up, 1973 Releases

Releasing Institution	Number	Percent	Recidivism Rate
Walpole	130	(14)	49%
Concord	334	(35)	55%
Norfolk	205	(22)	35%
Framingham	109	(12)	28%
Forestry Camps	68	(7)	40%
Pre-Release	105	(11)	35%
TOTAL	951	(100)	44%

When varying the time criterion from one to five years, analysis revealed that the greater proportion of recidivists were picked up during the first and second years of follow-up. Table 2 below summarizes the data on varying follow-up periods by specific institution of release.

Table 2

Varying Follow-up Periods: One to Five Years

Releasing Institution	One Year	Two Years	Three Years	Four Years	Five Years
Walpole	22%	34%	42%	45%	49%
Concord	28%	40%	47%	53%	55%
Norfolk	15%	25%	32%	35%	35%
Framingham	16%	21%	25%	28%	28%
Prison Camps	14%	29%	33%	38%	40%
Pre-Release	12%	21%	26%	32%	35%
TOTAL	21%	32%	37%	42%	44%

An interesting unanticipated side finding of our analysis was that in our subsequent data collection effort in the five year follow-up we found recidivists within the one year time criterion not originally detected in the former data collection effort. The original recidivism study of releases in the year 1973 reported a recidivism rate of 19% using the one year follow-up criterion, whereas our subsequent study reports a recidivism rate of 21% with the same one-year criterion. Further

analysis attributed this discrepancy to the time lag in which official records are posted. That is, evidence of out-of-state incarcerations as well as in-state county house of corrections and jail incarceration sometimes take more than a year to be officially posted in probation, parole, and corrections record keeping systems. When collecting recidivism data much later in time - as was the case in the five year follow-up - a greater chance of detection exists. Thus, out of the total population of 960 releases, eleven individuals (or 1% of the sample) who were recidivists were not detected as such in the original one year follow-up study. However, the difference in recidivism rates for these separate data collection efforts was not found to be statistically significant, and thus does not affect the validity of the former studies.

A principal concern of the present study is to evaluate whether or not trends discovered in one year follow-up analyses remain valid after a five year follow-up period. In the original 1973 recidivism study, among the major findings were the following overall trends: (1) participation in the furlough program was found to be associated with reduced rates of recidivism; (2) participation in pre-release reintegration centers was found to be associated with reduced rates of recidivism; and (3) the security level of the releasing institution was related to reduced recidivism - the lower the security level, the lower the

recidivism rate. Therefore our five year data was evaluated in order to determine whether or not these major trends remained valid.

Analysis revealed that all three trends remained consistent after five years of follow-up. Evidence of "cross-over effects" was not found to exist. In terms of furlough program participation, it was found that those individuals who had participated in such programs prior to release had lower rates of recidivism than individuals released without experiencing furloughs. The difference was found to be statistically significant. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Recidivism Rate Broken Down By
Participation in Furlough Program: Five Year Follow-Up

	Number	Percent	Recidivism Rate
Furlough Participant	661	(69)	40%
Non-Participant	290	(31)	52%
TOTAL SAMPLE	951	(100)	44%

Secondly, it was found that individuals released from prison via pre-release reintegration centers had lower rates of recidivism than those released directly from walled institutions. Table 4 summarizes this data. For males, the difference was found to be statistically significant. Females were not participating in pre-release centers in large enough numbers at this time to warrant statistical tests of significance. Only 2 females were released from pre-release centers during the year 1973.

Table 4
Recidivism Rate Broken Down By
Pre-Release Participation: Five Year Follow-up Period

	Number	Percent	Recidivism Rate
Released Via Pre-Release Centers	105	(11)	35%
Released By Other Institutions	846	(89)	45%
TOTAL	951	(100)	44%

Thirdly, when looking at security level of releasing institution it was found that lower security institutions had lower rates of recidivism than the maximum security institutions. Again, this result was found to be statistically significant. A summary of this data is presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Recidivism Rate By Security Level
Of Releasing Institution: Five Year Follow-up

Security Level of Releasing Institution	Number	Percent	Recidivism Rate
Maximum	464	(49)	54%
Medium	205	(22)	35%
Minimum	68	(7)	40%
Pre-Release	105	(11)	35%
MCI-Framingham*	109	(12)	28%
TOTAL	951	(100)	44%

* MCI-Framingham is listed separately because it includes all four security levels within the institution.

As a final portion of the original one year follow-up study, analyses focused on the identification of specific personal background and criminal history variables that were found to distinguish between individuals who recidivated and those who did not. From that analysis, eight categories of variables were found to distinguish between the incidence of recidivism and non-recidivism. These are summarized in the following outline:

- I. Marital Status
- II. Prior Military History
- III. Education
- IV. Employment
- V. History of Drug Use
- VI. Criminal Career Pattern
 - (1) Number of Prior Court Appearances
 - (2) Number of Prior Court Appearances for Property Offenses
 - (3) Juvenile Incarceration
 - (4) Prior State or Federal Incarcerations
 - (5) Age at First Arrest
- VII. Age at Incarceration
- VIII. Type of Offense

Looking at these same variables with a five year follow-up analysis, the same patterns held. Thus no "cross over effects" occurred.

Individuals who were married at the time of incarceration had significantly lower recidivism rates when released than those not married. Individuals who had previously served in the armed services had significantly lower recidivism rates than those who had not experienced military service. In terms of the variable of Educational Attainment, it was found that those individuals who had completed at least 10 grades of formal education exhibited lower recidivism rates. Individuals who had worked at any one job for longer than one year prior to their incarceration had disproportionately lower rates of recidivism than individuals who had not held a job for at least one year. Whether or not an individual had a known history of drug use influenced the rate of recidivism. Thus, a known history of drug use is associated with higher recidivism rates.

The category criminal career pattern seemed to reveal the strongest indicator of high and low recidivism risk. Those individuals deeply embedded in a criminal career consistently had the highest rates of recidivism. This was measured by five sub-categories. First, individuals who had longer records as measured by prior court appearances were higher recidivists. Secondly, individuals whose prior court records contained a larger number of property offenses had higher rates of recidivism. Thirdly, those individuals who began their criminal careers as juveniles and served juvenile incarcerations, were higher recidivism risks.

Fourthly, the fact that an individual had previously served one or more prior state or federal incarcerations increased the chances of recidivating. The final measure in the career criminal category was Age at First Arrest. Those individuals who began their officially recorded criminal careers at the age of 17 or younger had a higher recidivism rate than those who began their criminal careers after the age of 18. When all these measures of criminal career are added together it becomes evident that the length and seriousness of the criminal career clearly delineates a high risk recidivism potential.

The variable Age at Time of Incarceration clearly points to the fact that the younger offender is the higher recidivism risk. The final category of high recidivism risk was type of offense. Individuals originally committed for Murder I, Murder II, Manslaughter or Rape had the lowest recidivism risk potential. Property offenders, Drug Violation offenders, and offenders sentenced for escaping from a previous sentence had the higher recidivism risk potential.

Conclusion

The present study consists of an analysis of rates of recidivism for individuals released from Massachusetts' State Correctional Institutions. The particular population upon which the analysis was conducted consisted of all such releases in the year 1973. The follow-up period was five years.

The major findings of this study have shown that a five year recidivism follow-up results in a recidivism rate double that found in the traditional 1 year follow-up. It was further revealed that the major findings of previous departmental research using one year follow-up periods remain valid when a five year extended follow-up period is utilized. Specifically, these trends are:

- (1) Studies firmly demonstrate that participation in the Furlough Program is the most important variable in accounting for the systematic reduction in recidivism rates that is occurring in Massachusetts. When selection factors are controlled for the relationship remains positive.
- (2) The studies have also revealed that participation in pre-release programs prior to community reintroduction leads to reduce rates of recidivism.

- (3) Related to the finding discussed above, analyses revealed that individuals released from prison directly from medium or minimum security institutions (which includes pre-release centers) had significantly lower rates of recidivism than did those individuals released directly from a maximum security institution. This finding, also documented in previous Departmental recidivism studies, suggest a reintegrative or rehabilitative quality in the movement from maximum to medium to minimum security levels, as opposed to an abrupt release directly from a maximum security institution.

These findings provide striking support for the recently enacted community-based correctional network of programs in Massachusetts: Pre-Release Centers, Halfway Houses, Work and Education Release Programs, Co-Educational Institutions, and most importantly, the Furlough Program.

Analysis also revealed that the profiles distinguishing recidivists and non-recidivists developed from one year follow-up studies remain valid with 5 year follow-up studies.